{ See Note at end. }

UNITY

CHURCH-DOOR PULPIT,

FOR

FREEDOM, FELLOWSHIP AND CHARACTER IN RELIGION.

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PURE RELIGION AND UNDEFILED.

BY FREDERICK L. HOSMER.

[ANNUAL SERMON BEFORE THE WESTERN UNITARIAN CONFERENCE, 1884.]

If any man thinketh himself to be religious, while he bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.—*James* i: 26-27.

The chapter to which the text forms the close, and indeed this whole epistle ascribed to James, calls attention forcibly to the practical side of religion. There seem to have been men and women in the writer's time, as there are to-day, who thought themselves to be very religious but whose religion took little hold upon life. It did not keep them from unkind judgments of their fellow-beings nor did it make them one whit better, if indeed so good, than thousands who made no claim to special religiousness. They were not necessarily dishonest in all this, but they were self-deceived. They did not see their own weakness and inconsistency. For these people the author wrote his epistle, throwing all the emphasis upon the side of conduct and character in religion. He gives us here a suggestive definition of religion, wholly from the practical side and divorced from all formal rite and doctrine whatsoever. Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. He does not exclude any form of honest belief whether orthodox or heterodox, neither does he include it in his definition. He keeps simply to the ethical side of religion, its expression in character and conduct among men. The text is the more interesting for this fact, that it is the only

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attempted definition of the word *religion* in the New Testament. There are, to be sure, many passages enjoining the duties which we owe both to our fellowmen and to God; as, for example, where Jesus sums up the Law and the Prophets in the *Golden Rule*, or where Paul comprehends all in the one work *charity* or love. These and similar passages may be understood as giving a general summary of religious requirement. Yet this passage from James remains, as I have said, the only attempted definition of religion by name in the New Testament, if not indeed in our whole Bible.

Now whether this definition does really cover all that is to be included under the term *religion* or not is a question upon which people will differ. To me it does not seem to do so. I think in any full and complete meaning of the word there are aspects which are passed over or only implied in this definition. It puts the whole emphasis on a man's duties to the human needs about him and to his higher and nobler self-hood. But I think there is a sphere of thought and feeling which there is none of us that does not at times enter, binding us in that privatest and conscious relationship to God in worship, awe, indwelling trust and out-reaching love of the soul. All this more private, universally felt, yet really indefinable aspect of religion the text does not exclude, nor yet does it include it except so far as the very word *religion* to all men's thought carries something of this larger interpretation. It simply says that in the sight of God our Father pure religion and undefiled is to be found in conduct towards others and in personal character.

And I suppose the writer gave this definition with a purpose. Already in the churches there were those who clung strenuously to formal observances in which they had been educated and who grieved to see others setting them aside. Many exalted faith, to the confusion of some converts, and there were those who made pretensions to exceptional spirituality, whose daily walk was no credit to the fold but who brought only reproach upon themselves and it. And so the writer of this epistle, who seems to have been what we would call to-day a level-headed man, not especially imaginative nor much emotional but of excellent common-sense was trying to bring religion from the clouds of windy controversy, where these persons were flying it like a kite, into the affairs and relationships of common daily life.

But while this definition may be inadequate, considered as an interpretation of all that religion gathers up into itself in our thought, and doubtless was not meant to be otherwise by the man who gave it, yet this is really not to the point. For all definitions that have ever been given are open to similar criticism. None of them all is exhaustive and complete. They are like arrows shot at the mark, which strike one spot only, though some come nearer the heart of the object than others. Take, for example, the definition once given by Theodore Parker, and which seems to me a large and noble one of its kind, "the consciousness of God." I think too that such consciousness is calculated to ennoble and beautify the soul in all the relations of life. To believe heartily in God, to have the feeling of near relationship to him, this would seem naturally to overflow one's life with all tender and helpful ministries to one's fellows. Yet the vivid realization of this secret joy and strength, and especially the living within its constant atmosphere, is in no small measure matter of temperament. Some natures are more emotional than others, more sensitive to spiritual impression, more finely strung to the touches of devout fervor and ecstacy. And I have seen, as doubtless we have all seen, persons who possessed this warm emotional temperament, who were lovers of the prayer-meeting, who were what is

called "gifted" in prayer and exhortation, and to whom the exercises of the religious meeting were really very dear, who yet were by no means marked examples of noble and generous manhood and womanhood in the daily life. They were not hypocrites, not at all. There was no consciousness of pretense in them. They regarded themselves as exceptionally religious, and after their kind they were. But religion with them was a thing of moods rather than a rule of life; a transport of feeling rather than a direction to conduct. So that such a definition of religion as "the consciousness of God," as applied to examples like these, would seem very defective; for this they might be allowed to have on their own claim and yet they would be very incomplete and unsatisfactory representatives of what we most value in religion. The great point therefore in any definition of religion which we may make is not so much whether it covers all that religion properly includes—for we can be pretty sure that it will not do so—but rather this: *where does it put the emphasis?* What shall men plant themselves upon as sure and matter of question for none, however they may supplement this from their individual feeling and thought, as they well may and most likely will?

It was to this end that the writer of the text laid down his suggestive definition of religion. Having frankly conceded its partial character, a feature which it shares with all attempted definitions of what holds so large a place in human thought and life, let us now consider its merits.

And the great merit of this statement is this: that in this all-important matter of emphasis in religion the definition before us lays that emphasis in the right place. It puts conduct and personal character to the front. It makes religion a living force. It connects it directly with life and finds there its only adequate manifestation and proof. It leaves disputed points, points which by their very nature have been and will remain open to difference of view, and comes squarely upon ground whereon it would seem that all good people must be agreed. And this, I say, is a great merit.

Consider for a moment the interdependence of society, the close relationships which men sustain to each other. No man liveth to himself alone. How truly has that been said! There is no life which does not touch some other life, none which is not itself at times much dependent on others. From our birth unto our death we stand in close relationship to other lives. Beginning with the home circle into which we are born, as our life widens in scope this net-work of relationship thickens and widens also. Man is no hermit by nature. He seeks the fellowship of his kind. He builds society. Our civilization, name and thing, comes from *civis*, the *citizen*—man in union with his fellows in the State or community. Take the home, the family. How much does its happiness, its welfare, depend on the kindly bearing, the faithfulness of each member in the particular relations each sustains towards the others? How much can selfishness, ill-temper, want of proper consideration disturb the even flow of its joy and peace?

Passing out from the fold of the family we come into the broadening currents of associated life. Look at men in their business relations and observe how much is involved in this vast net-work of mutual service. How valuable is entire honesty, upright dealing, in the lawyer who gives you advice in law, the physician who comes into your home and prescribes for your disease, the merchant or shop-keeper of whom you must buy the commodities of life, the mechanic who builds or fashions for you after his trade, the teacher who takes your children in charge to instruct, the man behind the daily paper who pours

opinions into the public ear, the public official whom your vote has helped lift into influence and power, the trusted clerk in your office, the cook in your kitchen, the man or woman in whatsoever capacity upon whom you are brought into relations of dependence. You cannot escape this dependence. Wealth does not lift you above it, want does not sink you below it. As society advances, that dependence seems to grow greater, not less. I suppose that the average man in civilized society to-day is much more dependent than the simple savage of primitive times. More and more, man's happiness, or much that goes to the making of it, is given into the hands of his fellows. Human service becomes more and more differentiated and one's increasing needs are fed from vastly multiplied sources, while his reliances become proportionately multiplied. Observe how one man's unfaithfulness carries hindrance and hurt to many interests; how knavery and fraud involve loss and suffering to the innocent, far removed it may be; how this fine machinery of human relationships is disturbed and injured thereby; how distrust is engendered and man's faith in human nature itself impaired.

Consider also those relations not commercial but social, into which we are all brought and which play so large a part in human life; the fellowship and intercourse of life with life. And how valuable is courtesy—not the polish of mere outward manners, graceful movement and smooth speech—but the good-will of heart out of which all real courtesy must come. The wise considerateness, the reasonable spirit, the finer sympathy with its keen interpreting power, the kindly humanity that reaches out beyond special likings and friendships and takes up acknowledged relationship with all that is human, and lays to heart the Golden Rule: these invest character with a strength and a charm that none can see and not be drawn to, that none can come in contact with and not think the better of human nature therefor.

And, once more, when we contemplate the sadder and darker side of human society, when we are brought face to face with its suffering and pain, its ignorance and folly, its weakness and its sin; when we see the bruised and broken lives that lie along the world's great highway; when we look upon the burdens without and within that many are bending under; when we behold the inequalities of human existence, the poverty and need both of body and soul that call for wise and patient and loving ministry,—the great problem, in short, of a nobler and truer society here on earth, for which the best souls gone before us have labored and longed—then how large and beautiful appears to us this religion pure and undefiled, which makes itself a gospel of human helpfulness and holds a man to the great world's service, while it keeps him unspotted from all his contact with the evil and wrong therein!

And what I want to say, and what I have dwelt so long upon these relationships of human life in order to say, is this: that to you and to me and to all that have to do with them, it is of vastly more value and importance that A and B and C shall be faithful and true in these various relationships which they sustain than that they shall agree with us in opinion upon matters which confessedly lie beyond the demonstrable knowledge of us all, dear as such opinion to us individually may be. It is vastly more desirable that people shall be guided by entire integrity in their business, by faithful affection and duty in their families, by a courteous and kindly spirit in social intercourse, by a high sense of honor in places of official trust, and by a compassionate interest and helpfulness in the presence of human misfortune and suffering and need, than that they shall be able to talk learnedly upon the

nature of the Godhead, and hold the commonly accepted views of Bible inspiration, and of the mission and part of Israel in the world's history. For their opinions on these things do not closely concern us. They are matters which we can well leave to their farther study and thought; matters indeed which must be so left. But the other points do concern us, and they concern us greatly. They bear upon others in the conduct of life. They help or hinder the whole movement of society. And if ever the kingdom come on this earth, of old longed for and whose reign was to be Righteousness, it will come not through a uniformity of belief touching the things that transcend our exact and demonstrable knowledge, but through a new moral emphasis whereby conduct and character shall be given their proper place and importance as the crown of religion. Righteousness, that old prophet word, will be the way of salvation and the only way of salvation for the individual and for society.

As one looks out upon the field of religious thought and discussion to-day, one cannot fail to see the movement of the finer spirits in the different ecclesiastical folds towards some such interpretation of religion as is given us in our text. There has been a gradual shifting of the emphasis in religion along the whole line, and that process is still going on Where once it was bound up with certain theological speculations, it is now conceived of as quite separable from these, and to lie rather in the spirit of one's life; that is, in personal character and the daily conduct. The time has gone by—let us hope never to return—when a man is to be accounted religious or otherwise according to his acceptance or rejection of a six-days' creation of our planet, or of the plenary inspiration of the Hebrew and early Christian writings. Indeed, to believe that these are not properly revelation at all but only the "record" of a revelation has now come to be passable orthodoxy. Ministers and laymen can hold tolerably free opinions to-day about the leading Old Testament characters without impeachment of their "good and regular standing," certainly without incurring the suspicion of having no religion. The time is sure to come when the same influences at work will bring about the same freedom of judgment touching the characters of the New; when a man's piety will not depend for its recognition on a particular view of John or Paul, or even of Jesus; because religion, or all that part of it which reaches out from each private life and concerns society, will more and more be seen to be distinguishable from these things and really to be far more fundamental.

I do not think there is less religious faith in the world to-day than in the ages before us. Some tell us that there is, and these people bewail the evil times on which religion has fallen. I do not share their fear. On the contrary I believe that there is a larger aggregate of real faith lying silently in human hearts than the so-called ages of faith ever knew. In any and every age the finer spirits, the men and women whose lives are governed by great ideals, who live in conscious relationship to the Highest and Holiest, have been and are few; and a large part of what has passed for faith has been less an active principle or motive of conduct than a dull and ineffective acquiescence. It has not been a faith that redeemed life to nobler living. And to-day there is this finer individnal faith, to be found in all folds and unidentified with particular theologies. There is also the old dull, nerveless acquiescence; and there is earnest doubt; and there is most un-earnest indifference. Always it has been thus to the vision of the time. But as touching what are commonly considered essential beliefs in religion,—God spirit, human accountability, ultimate

destiny commensurate with the large providence of our life,—I think we are quite as likely to err on the side of unjust disparagement here as to give our age undue credit. We live in a period of mental reaction and recasting of religious thought. Men are seeking new statements of the soul's time-old conviction and dream. Not all questioning is unbelief, not all doubt is denial. There is an attitude of essential faith often where thought declines to formulate itself. Don't accede, let me caution you, to the too ready and so often superficial charge of the decay of religion or of essential faith in our time, and do not fear that the word God will not appear in the dictionaries of the next century, or that like *daimon* and *shade*, it will be written with a small letter.

"Achilles ponders in his tent,
The kings of modern thought are dumb;
Silent they are, though not content,
And wait to see the future come.
* * * * * * *
"Silent, while years engrave the brow;
Silent——the best are silent now."

But this silence is not in "the best" the silence of unbelief nor of despair. It is not the silence of content, still less is it the silence of indifference. It is a silence as far removed from sympathy with the flippant denial and noisy sciolism that vex our ears, as from the narrow and dry dogmatism of the past. It is born rather of the deeper soundings of feeling and thought. It is a reaction, sometimes extreme, but in the end to prove a most healthful reaction from the proneness to too familiar definition and statement touching the deepest themes of human thought; ideas that overarch the mind of man as the natural skies invest the earth we tread, but whose very infinitude precludes their imprisonment in our toy-like creeds. Men, the most thoughtful and reverent minds, are recognizing not the fulness of religion but rather some serious lack thereof in the speculation that talked so familiarly of God, his "scheme" of salvation, and assumed to lay bare the depths of his wisdom in the ages before us. New grandeur has opened to our eyes in the universe, the issues of life deepen and broaden, and we grow more modest before the ever-increasing mystery and marvel of existence; while with finger on our lips we echo the worshipful word of the old-time psalmist: Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain unto it! And thus the whole effect of this reaction upon such minds is to shift the emphasis to the ethical side of religion; to sound the supremacy of character and conduct, and to take shelter in the simple but central thought of God as "the Eternal that loveth righteousness."

How partial and unsatisfactory seem all the formulated creeds that synods and councils have devised to describe the indescribable and to state what ceases to have any vitality the moment it is set in a form of words regarded as final! How partial and unsatisfactory, I say, in proportion as our thought goes deeper down and we once feel the unspeakable realities, like heavenly visions shining and vanishing and evermore shining again in our varying spiritual moods! Mr. Beecher once said that it was the things that men did not know accurately about, and under our present limitations could not know accurately about, that had made the matter of all the articles of all the creeds of the churches; while that which lay close beside them and constituted the principles of right conduct and human relationship had been ignored as common and of no account in the comparison. But if this man's orthodoxy be impeached and his testimony set aside, let me quote the rather remarkable words of Dean Mozley in his interesting *Reminiscences*, whose churchly standing will not be questioned, and who makes this significant confession:

"The truth is that in religious matters

everybody expects to be called on to say what he does not understand; and they who impose the words evidently are the the last to wish them to be intelligible. The writers of our hymn-books adapt their theory of the Divine Being and operations to the exigencies of the metre and ryhme. * * * The sentences of a sermon succeed one another too rapidly to make sense strictly necessary. So religious people are habituated to be random in their expressions. They speak in unknown tongues, for others to interpret if they can."

Certainly from outside quarters I know of no impeachment of this whole matter of creed-building and creedal subscription, as illustrated in the past, more scathing and more severe, more annihilating in its force, than this which comes to us from a clergyman of the English Church.

It is under this growing conviction that I have come to feel the wisdom and the worth of the purely ethical rather than the theological statement as the bond or covenant of religious association. I said this not long ago to my own congregation. I said that even if a man could not clearly say, "I believe in God," yet gave proof to the world of upright character and a good life, and wished to find with us a church home, I would welcome him to the inmost fold. I knew of none then for whom the remark would have special application, and such instances would probably be rare. But I would want to reach out that hand of fellowship. When the great communions around us, when the individual churches, nominally at least, are all standing for theologies and "schemes" of salvation *plus* character, I would have one stand supremely for the ethical values of life and put up its flag so mottoed. By this sign will the coming church conquer. Not—let me say here, for I would not like to be misunderstood in this matter—not that I think belief in God a small or inconsequential thing for you or for me. On the contrary, I deem it a very great thing. More and more my whole faith and philosophy find in theism their crown and completion, their inevitable goal. I can have for myself no other than a theistic interpretation of the universe. Nor do I for one moment believe that the future church, shaped by all the forces of the present, will leave behind this theism under any humanitarian drift. Nay, it is because I believe this faith so natural and related to man that I deem it quite safe to be left unwritten, while we lift up into larger prominence this ethical side of religion and lay our emphasis there.

Men have been too much given to regarding Christianity as a system of theology let down into human life from without; and they have attempted to formulate that theology from the words of Jesus and his first followers. They have made up a doctrine of God therefrom, of the soul, of atonement and salvation, of prophetic authority and inspiration, of final judgment, the rewards of heaven and the woes of hell. And then they have taken this patch-work of doctrine and enjoined acceptance of it as a saving ordinance. They have fondly dreamed that herein they had a sure cure for selfishness and sin, a prescription for all the ills that afflict the moral health of society. But they have been mistaken in this, and the inadequate results of this interpretation of Christianity seem only too apparent in the failure of the churches and of the popular religion to lay firmer hold upon character and the morals of men's daily life.

This was not Jesus' way, nor was it Paul's way. Neither was it the way of the great prophets of their race before them. They had no theological system to impose. They knew very little apparently of systems. They were not so enlightened in this matter of systems as some of our modern clergymen appear to be. But this they did do: They called men

to righteousness of life. They emphasized moral obedience. They had ready rebuke for what was wrong in human conduct. They spoke for justice. They pleaded the claims of human brotherhood. Thus they quickened many to a better and holier life. And then out of these greatly quickened moral forces in individual lives there did come a finer and freer faith in spiritual realities; a clearer conviction of God, a nobler ideal of society on earth, a larger thought of the soul, and a surer hold on the things beyond this bound of time and sense.

And so will it be with us to-day. So must it be with men always and everywhere. Our real faith, whatever phraseology we use, springs from within and has its measure and limit there. Men repeat trippingly on the tongne the faith of Jesus, the assurance of Paul, the devout utterance of earlier or later psalmist and seer. But how often is it quotation only, empty breath, however well meant! The only way to spiritual vision is through the door of a finer moral obedience. This was Jesus' oft-repeated teaching. Pureness of heart precedes the seeing of God, and knowledge of the doctrine comes of doing the will. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord,"—how long yet shall be needed the reminder and reproof? The temple of our faith is built from the earth upward, not from the skies downward. Spiritual and material architecture in this follow the same rule. And this pure-religion-and-undefiled, though it seem to begin only with the earth, will grow heavenward as the years of our life go on, shaping for us a theology having its verification within and equal to all our needs.

Our "Church-Door Pulpit" hints its purpose in its name. It aims to furnish fortnightly a transfigured tract,—transfigured by being paid for, and by representing not so much a given system of beliefs as the emphasis, in somewhat varying beliefs, on "Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion;" this tract to be taken from the rack or table at the church-door to the home, there to serve its little mission by reading in the family, lending to a neighbor, mailing to a distant friend, etc. We hope the plan may be destined to wide adoption by Liberal churches as part of their regular church-work.

The word "UNITY" in the title bears to the Committee who arrange the series a wide meaning, pointing more to the substance, than to the forms, of religious thought and faith; and in inviting contributions they have sought, not only through the whole range, but in both directions beyond the range, of those who bear the "Unitarian" name,—though most of the writers must naturally be found within that name. "New Orthodoxy," "New Judaism," those who care for no name but "Religion," and the "Ethical Societies," will all be represented. The choice of subject is left to the writers; and *each writer is responsible for his own utterance alone, and for nothing else in the series.* "One of your best—a life-helping sermon, or a thought-sermon reaching the life," was the invitation sent out.